

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER OF THE WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #50 answer: VIRGINIA SAXIFRAGE (*Micranthes virginensis*)

Spreading on outcrops, Virginia saxifrage is a welcome sign of spring and a tough survivor. You might hear it called Early saxifrage (for its timing) or Everlasting (for its persistence). Saxifrage means “rock-breaker,” and this plant thrives in sparse soil or in cracks between rocks.

The fleshy, scalloped leaves form a rosette close to the ground, where the early spring temperatures are a little warmer. These leaves store water, and their thin cuticle lets them absorb dew. There are no leaves above them on the scape, whose mission is to lift the flowers. This lack of cauline leaves is the best way to recognize which former members of Saxifraga were moved to the new genus Micranthes.

Once the scape reaches perhaps 4 inches in height, abundant flowers open in branched clusters. The stalk keeps right on lengthening, becoming as much as 12 inches tall. The flowers have five white pointed petals and ten bright yellow stamens. Sepals, petals, and stamens fuse at their bottoms into a floral cup called a *hypanthium*.

Thick hairs on the stem stick straight out. Glandular and sticky towards the top, they discourage insects from climbing up, so bees and other pollinators arrive by air. In the center of each flower, they find twin teardrop-shaped ovaries leaning apart, pointing pistils up. They become beaked capsules, red to lavender, full of lined-up seeds.

Early wildflowers like this depend on heavy photosynthesis before trees leaf out. Two centuries of data show them becoming squeezed for time. Responding to climate change, trees shift leaf time faster than wildflowers shift bloomtime—a troubling trend.

### WILDFLOWER #51

**Clues:** In the marsh, big yellow flowers glow above heart-shaped leaves.

